FREE

TAGA SPORTS

OCTOBER 2010

A MAD DASH FOR GOLD

WOMEN + FOOTBALL

LIQUID REMEDIES
for athletes and 'try'-athletes

MMA is here to stay
BOON OR BANE?

HOW THE MICRO GAMES CAME TO BE
AND THE LETTER THAT STARTED IT ALL

The islands' favorite 'dingas' break records for the CNMI

REZNE WONG keeps a good head on his **AWESOME** shoulders

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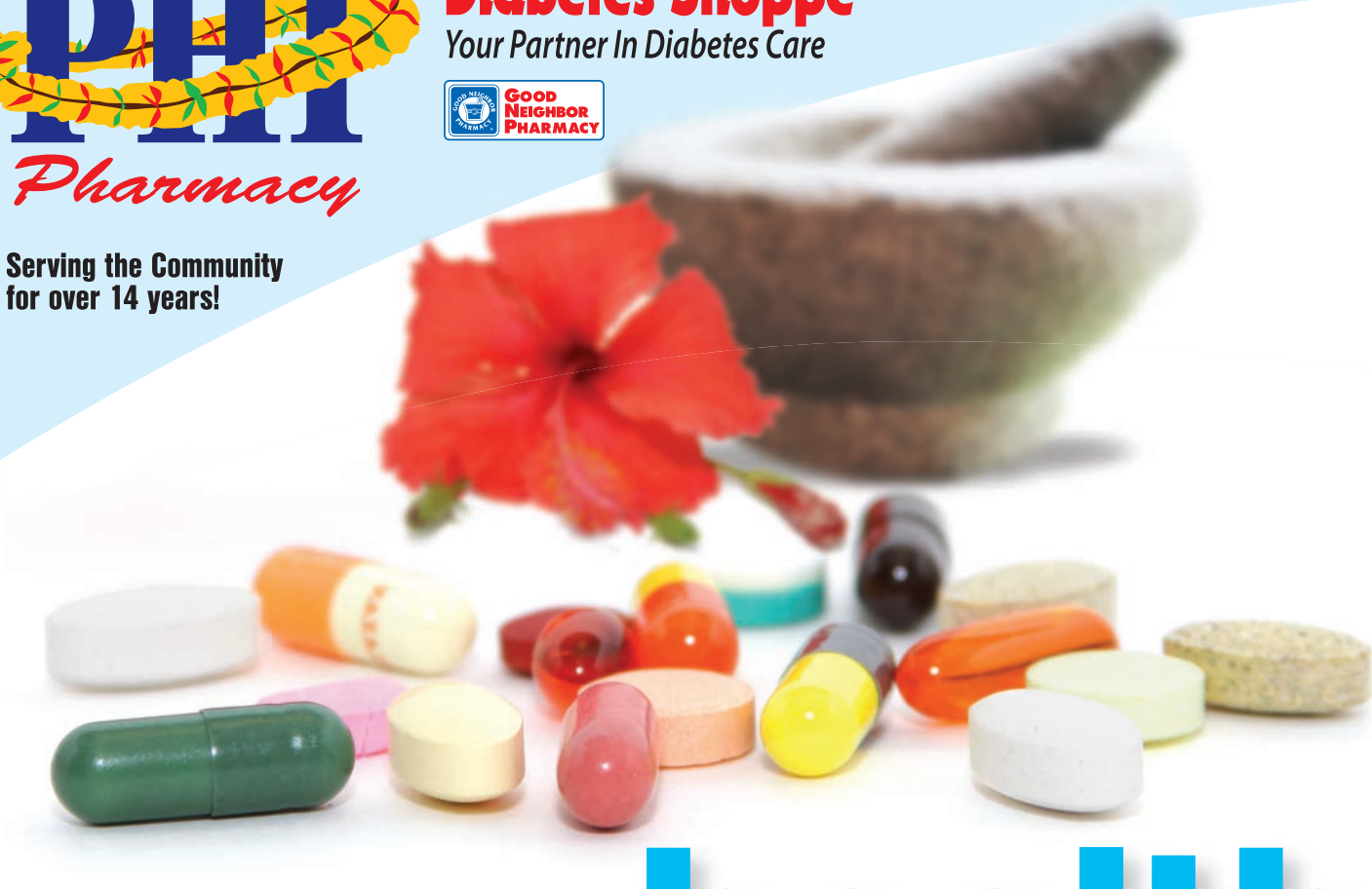

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EDITOR'S NOTE

COVER ART
Gold, silver, and bronze medals awarded at the 7th Micronesian Games in Palau.

Photograph by
Jessie Pagsinohin

Welcome to the maiden issue of TAGA *Sports*, the Commonwealth's first sports magazine.

An advertiser recently asked me what our target market was in creating this magazine. I admit I was baffled by the question—not because I didn't know the answer but because I had to frame a fitting reply that would explain the philosophy behind the creation of TAGA *Sports*.

The brainchild of Jerry Tan (a sports fanatic if there ever was one), he emphasized during our first editorial meeting that he wants the magazine to not only highlight sports events but for it to also be a means to encourage people to pursue a healthier lifestyle. That means the magazine should be accessible to as wide a range of readers as possible. Its goal to get people moving will focus not just on those at the peak of their game but also the young 'uns and the *man'amko*. This is what we will attempt to do, in this and in future editions.

The 7th Micronesian Games had just wrapped up when we had our first story conference and it was the logical choice to be our main feature, backstopped by the excellent performances of the Commonwealth's athletes. In the following pages, you will read about the exploits of some of these athletes, particularly the winning ways of Rezne Wong, the Top Male Athlete of the Micronesian Games, and the charm of the Bennett sisters, Yvonne and Yvette.

This inaugural issue also has something for football fanatics, track athletes, and mixed martial artists and their hordes of fans. If your sport wasn't featured, don't worry. We have already lined up future articles for our next editions that will surely have a little bit for everyone. We intend to keep this going for as long as we can and we will certainly never run out of stories to tell, of people to feature, and of victories and defeats to cover.

Readers are also encouraged to let us know what you think of this issue and what you'd like to read in future editions. Just shoot me an email at editor@tagasports.com and we'll see what we can do.

We hope you'll enjoy reading TAGA *Sports* as much as we had fun putting it together.

Sinseramente,

JAYVEE VALLEJERA
Editor

TAGA SPORTS

VOLUME 1 NO. 1 | OCTOBER 2010

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SCOREBOARD

16 For all his youth, this outstanding young man has a good head on his shoulders. Rezne Wong amazes both in the pool and out of it.

8 Pressed for athletes, funds, and time, the Team Marianas' campaign in the 7th Micro Games is in itself a tale of grit and beat-the-odds drama.

14 Forget plain water. Today's go-to post-workout hydration for CNMI athletes range from the patented protein drinks to the ever-reliable coconut water.

18 The Micronesian Games: How it started, who came up with it, who helped build it, and the backroom deals to make it happen.

20 A tale of life B.F. (before football) and the amazing things that happened since—from someone who has fallen hard for the world's most popular sport.

22 Sisters act Yvonne and Yvette Bennett insist that they may look and sometimes think alike but they are quite different when it comes to a lot of things—like fashion.

24 In 2001, the typical response in the CNMI would have been "mixed martial what?" Fast-forward to 2010 and mixed martial arts has become a staple in the islands' entertainment scene. It's here to stay.

26 Is mixed martial arts good or bad for the CNMI? Trench Tech Promotions owner Cuki Alvarez talks about the fastest growing and one of the most controversial sports in the world.

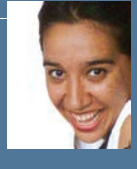
28 If the U.S. has the U.S. Olympic Committee and Guam has the Guam National Olympic Committee, the CNMI has the Northern Marianas Amateur Sports Association.

29 When not teaching P.E., Michael Villagomez, the islands' original golden boy of swimming, is busy these days coaching the Commonwealth's newest crop of swimmers.

WRITERS BLOC

BOB COLDEEN
Bob became a sports reporter because when he stopped playing sports, he had too much free time. He's been in Micronesia since 1973 but never stopped being a Florida Gator. When he's not watching or talking about sports, he is thinking about sports even when he is sleeping. He believes the invention of sports marked the beginning of civilization.

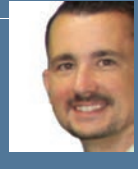
ROSELYN MONROYO
A sports junkie since kindergarten, Roselyn has a mind like a sieve (she once forgot to bring her bag to school) but ask her about what happened at a game and she will give you a blow-by-blow account enough to bore you to tears. She once used tennis and jackstone rubber balls to play basketball in makeshift goals. She hates Kobe Bryant and loves *The Mentalist's* Kimball Cho. Her first story, written and published in a sports page of a Philippine newspaper, was about cockfighting.



CATHERINE PERRY ANDERSON
Cathy jumped at the chance to play football when Northern Marians Islands Football Association started a women's league about five years ago. Her interviews with other women for her article, "Falling for Football" rang home in many ways. "Football has made me a stronger person physically, mentally, and emotionally. Every week I'm blessed to be able to play, and football is definitely one of the great loves of my life."

WALTER CEPEDA-SUTHERLAND
Walter, born and raised in Evansville, Indiana, moved to Saipan to spend time with his family and experience the island culture. Walter played a whole lot of baseball as a kid and, being a Hoosier, naturally picked up on the game of basketball. He also played a couple of years of football. While on Saipan, Walter hopes to learn the Chamorro language and learn how to prepare as many dishes of the local cuisine as possible.

MARK RABAGO
Mark started as a business reporter for *Saipan Tribune* in 2001 but eventually gravitated to sports. He couldn't be happier as he grew up idolizing Kareem Abdul Jabbar and Magic Johnson of the Showtime L.A. Lakers and Robert "Sonny" Jaworski and the old Ginebra team in the '80s and '90s. When not preoccupied with his writing and editing duties, Mark is busy growing his Transformers collection and being a doting dad to his precocious 3- and 7-year-old daughters.



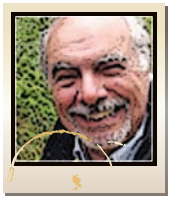
BRAD RUSZALA
Brad earned his writing chops covering sports for the *Saipan Tribune*. Not content to simply report on the world of sports, Brad has competed in numerous endurance events and triathlons in the United States, Japan, Saipan, Tinian and Rota. He has also represented the CNMI as a member of the Men's National Soccer Team since 2007. Though no longer with the *Tribune*, Brad has made the transition to the world marketing with the region's largest telecommunication provider.

The CNMI's **first sport magazine** will provide much insight and "inside" information for all standout athletes and teams and sporting events! This is a great idea.

Cuki Alvarez
Trench Tech Purebred Gym president and promoter

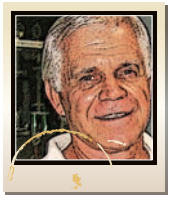
The CNMI has a rich tradition of producing great athletes and events, and a publication dedicated to their efforts and accomplishments will be a great addition to the sports world. We wish you much success and look forward to seeing the first issue of TAGA Sports.

Trey Garman
TEAM *Unlimited/XTERRA vice president*



Great work. Best of luck. Whatever Team Unlimited can help with, we will.

Dave Nichols
TEAM *Unlimited/XTERRA senior vice president*



I think the TAGA Sports magazine is a great idea. I think it will be a positive countermeasure to the antisocial activities we read about daily in the local newspapers. I have always thought that the CNMI should be marketed as a sports venue. The CNMI is the most temperate area in the world. Aside from a couple months of heavy rains and occasional storms, it is a place where athletes—local, national, and international—can train almost year-round.

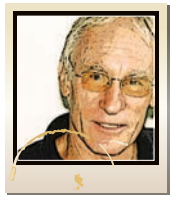
Since I first arrived on Saipan in 1979, there has been a lot of improvement in the island's sports facilities. I would like to see it become a sport's tour area for local, national, and international athletes for off-season conditioning. I think the idea of dedicating a magazine to highlight the CNMI athletes and sports facilities has great potential for attracting top men and women amateur and professional athletes/celebrities.

If the CNMI can present itself as a sport tourism facility, it will stop being a trick geography question and a noted athletic training and sport synergetic destination.

Jim Feger
Rocball creator

This [magazine] will have a big impact in the CNMI's sports community. It will help out all the sports federations since they will be featured in the magazine. Since it is free, you better print a lot of copies. Also, this magazine might attract more businesses to sponsor teams since this is actually free advertisement. Another thing, the athletes will love this magazine because they will be seeing their pictures in TAGA Sports and they will be reading your stories. This will also keep the public informed about the sporting events that are going on.

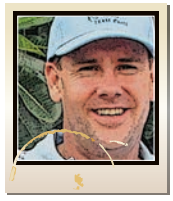
Abner Venus
BANMI board member



Anything you do in sports is great. People love to see their names in print, it's a real incentive, bring back history. Sport is a way of life and the best way to get out the word is to put it in writing.

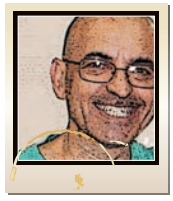
I congratulate you guys and hope the magazine is a success. There is so much history in sports in the CNMI, and over a very short period of time. Most people will not know about it unless someone brings it to their attention. Let's not lose it. Thanks for putting it together.

Bill Sakovich
NMASA Hall of Famer



I think it's great that there will be a magazine that highlights all the sports of the CNMI. There are so many different activities going on that it is hard to keep track. I hope there is an online version so we can get more international exposure.

Russ Quinn
Saipan Adventure Sports Club president,



Being an organizer of two of the premier sporting events on Saipan (XTERRA Saipan Championship and Tagaman Triathlon, I would love to see a sports magazine that can keep these events in the minds of the local population all year long.

Wolf Mojica
Taga, Inc. president

I think that's great, having a magazine dedicated to sports in the Mariana Islands. We need to change the perception of sports and showcase its value to our community not just in terms of health but moral values, character building, to name a few. I wish your magazine all the success and any contribution I can give will be my pleasure.

Elias Rangamar
NMA developmental coach

Sports is everyone's favorite topic these days. FREE is always nice. If it is free and readily available, most everyone would want to read it.

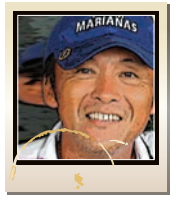
Stan Good
President, Tsunami Swimming Center Saipan

Sounds great to me! Hopefully it will be a great tool to help promote Saipan in the world of ecotourism and sports tourism. Sports is really one of the main attractions of this island. Good luck!

Suzy Kindel
Saipan Swim Club masters team member

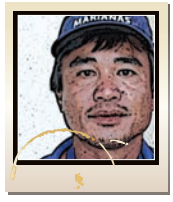
Having a sports magazine on the island is a great way to encourage young people to get involved in sports. The studies show us that young people who are involved in sports tend to get better grades and make healthier choices.

Brenda Schultz
Former CNMI National Football Team member



We are so glad to hear the launching of this sports magazine! It becomes a nice [medium of] information for everything sports in the CNMI. I think it is also a good stimulus for all athletes and all sports federations. I wish a nice photo gallery will be printed in the magazine. We will really support your magazine in the future.

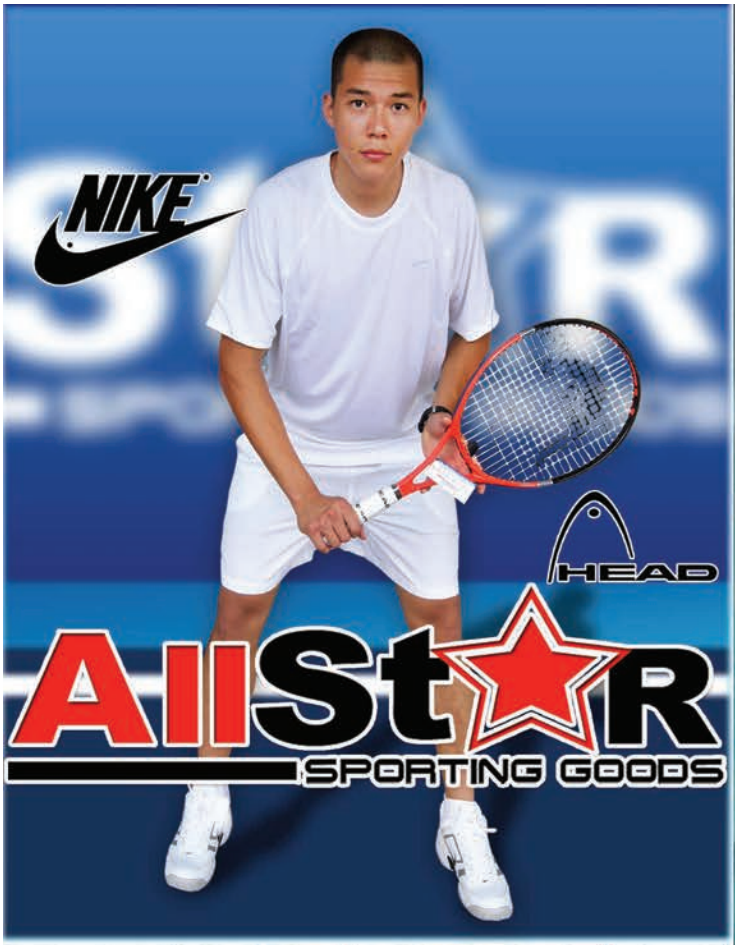
Hiroyuki Kimura
Tsunami Swimming Center Saipan head coach



Wow. It's great to hear that finally, we will have a sports magazine. It will be help us a lot in the Division of Sports and Recreation if the magazine will sort of print a schedule of events in advance, so we at the gym would know which tournaments will use our facility.

Joe Mettao
Division of Sports and Recreation staff

Email letters to the editor to editor@tagasports.com or mail to PMB 34, P.O. Box 10001, Saipan MP 96950. Submissions to TAGA Sports must include the writer's name, village address (no P.O. boxes), and daytime phone or mobile number. Letters may be edited for length and clarity and may be published or used in any medium. All submissions become the property of the publication and will not be returned.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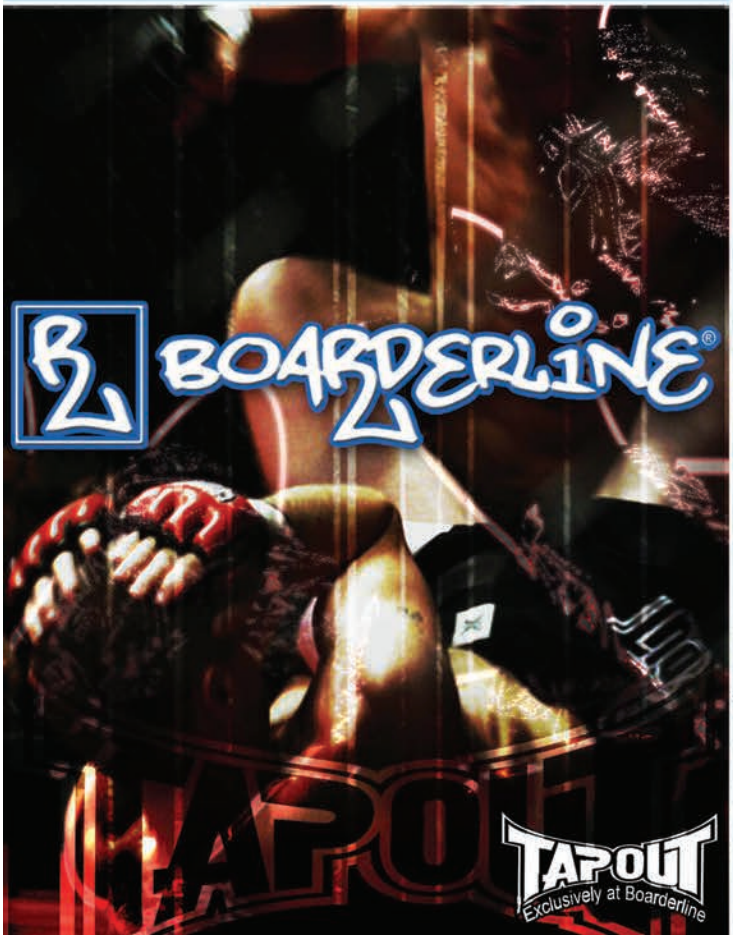
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ROSELYN B. MONROYO
TAGA Sports Staff Writer

Exceeding

More than the applause and even more than the medals, the CNMI's success in the 7th Micronesian Games is better measured with the many struggles it had had to hurdle so it could leave a mark in Palau.

ROSELYN B. MONROYO

TOP: Flag-bearer Tyrone Omar waves the CNMI flag during the parade of nations in the 7th Micronesian Games in Koror, Palau, in August.

RIGHT: Members of the all-male Ngardmau Dance Group wait for their turn to perform in front of spectators, guests, and participants in the opening ceremony of the 7th Micronesian Games in Koror, Palau, in August.

Team Marianas' dramatic

From getting athletes to commit and getting last-minute funding assistance from the government weeks before the Games kicked off, to keeping athletes healthy and motivated while playing outside the comfort of their home turf, the CNMI bets endured it all and returned to Saipan flush with the pride of ones who made it despite the odds stacked against them.

Wanted: Players

Most, if not all, athletes and coaches/officials in the CNMI are not full-time. They are either working or studying, so one of the toughest challenges to forming a team was to find players who were willing to put in considerable time and energy to train for the Games.

The CNMI Women's National Team was hit hardest by the lack of players willing to commit themselves and help the Commonwealth defend its gold medal in Palau.

Coach Bill Sewell lost most of the players that made up the 2006 gold medal team, either due to injury or not being able return to Saipan in time for the Games.

The Women's Nationals settled for a bunch of inexperienced high school ball players. Once in Palau, though, these neophytes proved they could play ball too, as just when most of the spectators were anticipating a Palau-Guam showdown in the finals, the CNMI cage belles entered the picture and advanced to the gold medal game before bowing to Guam.

The CNMI Tennis Team went to Palau with representatives in both the men's and women's divisions, but was without its No. 1 player, Ji Hoon Heo.

Heo had already committed to play in Australia and New Caledonia, leaving veterans Jeff Race and Todd Montgomery and newcomers Bobby Cruz and Peter Loyola the task of carrying the cudgels for the men's team.

The women's team had two—Kana Aikawa and Mayuko Arriola—of its four members practicing on their own for several months, as they were off-island.

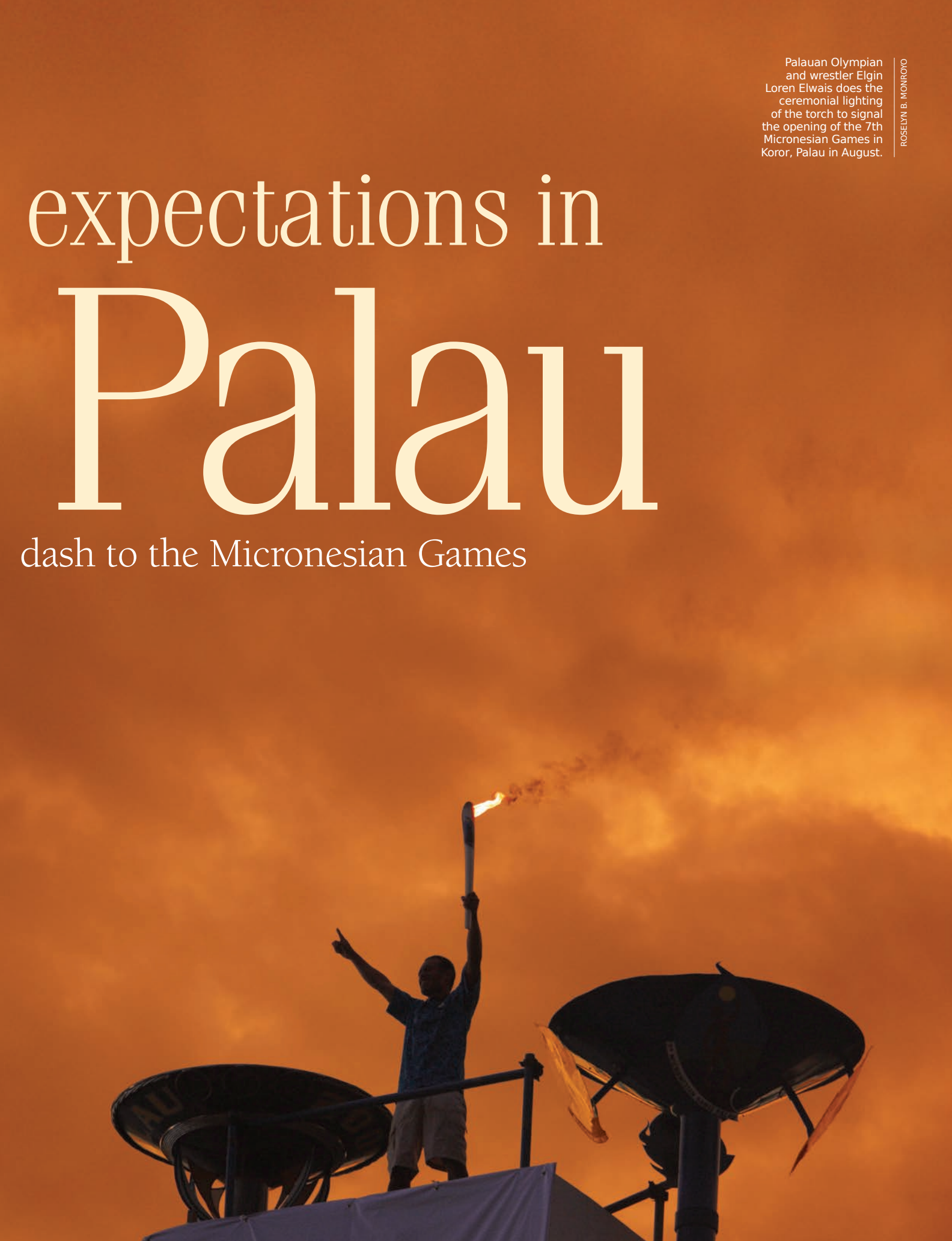
The CNMI Men's Table Tennis Team had two members training on Saipan and two others on Tinian. They were only reunited on the day they flew to Palau.

Palauan Olympian and wrestler Elgin Loren Elwais does the ceremonial lighting of the torch to signal the opening of the 7th Micronesian Games in Koror, Palau in August.

ROSELYN B. MONROYO

expectations in Palau

dash to the Micronesian Games



I rely on Accelerade's protein-enhanced sports drink before exercise, during, and after. For races, I use it to help me recover faster, because it contains water and sodium for hydration, carbohydrates to replenish my muscles, and protein to repair my muscle damage. And it tastes great!

Joshua A. Manglona
CNMI Triathlete

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The drama didn't end there. Just hours before their connecting flight to Guam, Steve Lim, Budhi Gurung, Su Yu Dong, and Luke Lu had to stop by the U.S. Customs and Immigration Services office to iron out some problems with their travel documents.

Baseball and athletics teams had more athletes available for their competitions, but had members who were slated to play in other sports too, which meant dividing practice time and finding the right schedules during actual events were tough.

The swim team also had members from two famously fractious and competitive clubs on Saipan. They managed to set aside their differences, though, to give truth to the cliché about what happens when people unite, combining for more than half of the total gold medal haul of the CNMI.

Members of the CNMI outrigger canoe team paddle back to shore after completing the 500m race in the canoe competition of the 7th Micronesian Games at the Meyuns Seaplane Ramp. ROSELYN B. MONROYO

CNMI'S MEDAL HAUL

	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1969 Micro Games (Saipan)	2	4	6	12
1990 Micro Games (Saipan)	9	17	12	38
1994 Micro Games (Guam)	14	34	30	78
1998 Micro Games (Palau)	36	27	15	78
2002 Micro Games (Pohnpei)	24	26	17	67
2006 Micro Games (Saipan)	34	33	31	98
2010 Micro Games (Palau)	44	23	25	92

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7TH MICRONESIAN GAMES

ROSELYN B. MONROYO

Kai Staal leads participants to the starting line of the 5-kilometer ocean swim competition in the 7th Micronesian Games in the waters off the Palau Pacific Resort in Koror in August.

HOW MUCH DID IT COST?

CNMI

- $130,000 plus: The estimated total cost for over 130 delegates (include airfare, accommodation, and food)
- $1,000: the estimated cost for the Palau trip per delegate
- $249: The amount each delegate paid.
- $250: The amount NMASA shoulder per each delegate
- $60,000: The amount CNMI delegates got from the government

POHNPEI

- $200,00: The estimated cost for around 200 delegates (include airfare, accommodation, and food)
- $1,000: Estimated cost per each delegate
- $50,000: The amount FSM central government allotted for the team's trip to Palau
- $210,000: The amount the State (Congress) allotted for the team's trip to Palau
- $260,00 plus: Pohnpei's budget for the Games
- $0.00: Delegates' share for the Micro Games expenses

YAP

- $110,000: The estimated cost of trip for 120-plus delegates (include airfare, accommodation, and food)
- $900 plus: The estimated cost per each delegate
- $200 plus: The estimated amount each delegate had to shoulder for the cost of the trip
- $50,000: The amount FSM central government allotted for the team's trip to Palau
- $34,000: The amount the State (Congress) allotted for the team's trip to Palau

KOSRAE

- $114,000: The estimated cost of trip for 80-plus delegates (include airfare, accommodation, and food)
- $1,300 plus: The estimated cost per each delegate
- $250: The estimated amount each delegate had to shoulder for the cost of the trip
- $50,000: The amount the FSM central government allotted for the team's trip to Palau
- $30,000: The amount the State (Congress) allotted for the team's trip to Palau.

MARSHALL ISLANDS

- $341,000: The estimated cost of trip for 150-plus delegates (include airfare, accommodation, and food)
- $2,200: The estimated cost per each delegate
- $250,00 plus: The estimated amount shouldered by the Marshall Island National Olympic Committee and its member federations
- $200: The amount each delegate paid
- $60,000 plus: The amount the Republic of Marshall Islands government allotted for the team's trip to Palau

PALAU

- $1.2 million: The estimated amount Palau spent to host the 2010 Micronesian Games
- $200,000: The estimated amount Palau spent for its 274 delegates to the Games
- $700,000: The amount the Palau government appropriated for the Games

Funding dilemma

The next—and toughest—hurdle was finding the coin to finance the trip.

It costs around $1,000 to send one delegate to Palau. The Northern Marianas Amateur Sports Association shelled out $250 from its own coffers and then required athletes and sports federations to shoulder the $700 balance that they can pay across four months starting January, like a layaway plan!

Federations with small delegations met the deadline, while groups with big teams scrambled for funds, ending with the complete payments just weeks before Team Marianas left for Palau in July.

With the islands' tanking economy, athletes and teams had to be creative to augment their funds. They held fundraising tournaments, sold hotdog sandwiches, and courted private supporters.

The cash-trapped government also managed to scrounge some $60,000 to fund the Team Marianas' campaign in the Micro Games, but not before athletes and sports officials did some flesh-pressing at the House of Representatives to justify the need for financial assistance. The monetary aid was released in the second week of July, barely two weeks before the first batch of CNMI delegates left for Palau.

From $700, NMASA required each delegate to pay only $426 for the Palau trip, lifting a costly burden from the shoulders of athletes and sports federations.

Mounting pressure

In Palau, the temperamental weather, a series of injuries, sickness, fatigue, and bad breaks contributed to the increasing pressure on the CNMI bets to equal, if not surpass, their 2006 performance.

The CNMI Women's Nationals had at least four players nursing injuries, but they continued to play. Three others had stomach flu and spent the night throwing up instead of sleeping and preparing for the important semis game against Palau.

The swim team battled exhaustion, swimming in the morning for the qualifying heats and returning to the pool at night for the finals for three straight days.

The tennis team spent the last two days of the competition playing multiple games to make up for rained-out matches.

"The schedule and number of matches to play in the Micro Games is always tough. That posed a huge challenge to our team, as Todd, me, Kana, and Mayuko all had to play five matches on the final day added on. The Guam players overall didn't have to play so much, as we had knocked their men out of the singles. That gave them a small advantage later in the day in the doubles and mixed doubles, as they were a bit fresher," Race said.

Race and company also had to be at the venue hours before their matches, not to warm up but to pick up the rollers and dry up the courts.

The baseball team was also a victim of the spiteful weather. They played two games in one day twice and lost a crucial semis match despite leading against host Palau.

The CNMI sluggers led, 7-5, at the top of the seventh inning when the game was rained out. Baseball rules for rained-out matches state that the winner must be decided based on the scores in a completed inning and in this case, Palau was up, 5-3, after six and was awarded the first finals spot.

The bad break forced the CNMI to play Guam in a late night rubber match and the next day, the former battling the well-rested Palau and the home crowd in the gold medal game, which lasted for about five hours due to rain delays.

The CNMI delegates had only themselves to turn to just to survive these hurdles. When not scheduled to play, they were in other venues to support their compatriots.

"We were a TEAM, everyone pulled together and supported each other," said Race, who had members of the table tennis and baseball teams watching some of the tennis games.

Surpassing expectations

When the 10-day event concluded, the CNMI forgot all the pain it had to go through before and during the Games. When the final medal standings were posted, it showed the Commonwealth with 44 gold medals, 23 silver, and 25 bronze medals.

The CNMI collected 10 more gold medals than its haul in 2006 when Saipan hosted the Games. The 44 gold medals in Palau was also the most the Commonwealth got since the inception of the Games in 1969.

"We exceeded expectations and that made us proud," CNMI *chef de mission* Michael White said.

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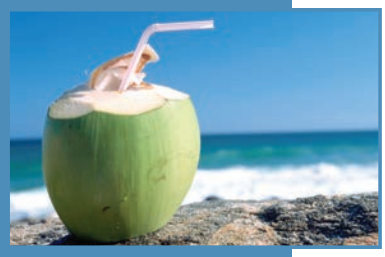

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Whether you're making your way down the beach pathway, pumping weights at the gym, crossing the finish line of your favorite race, or nursing a killer hangover, hydration plays a critical role in your body's performance.

Drinking water the night before will get you ready for your competition, and electrolyte replacements will help your body sustain optimum performance under the most grueling conditions.

So where do local athletes turn for their post-game rehydration needs?

Saipan's multisport professional Mieko Carey and Tinian's favorite son, Joshua Manglona, opt for Endurox R4 for their post-workout recovery, and it's not just because they're sponsored by Brabu Pharmacy.

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BRAD RUSZALA
Contributing Writer

Lewie Tenorio recently joined Carey in Palau where they bagged team gold in triathlon for the CNMI in the 7th Micronesian Games. During his rigorous training rides that routinely last between three to four hours. Tenorio takes in so many energy gel packets and sports drinks that he steers clear of the sweet stuff and heads for a tall glass of cold water to resuscitate his taste buds when he dismounts.

"When I'm ready to take in more sweet stuff to replenish my glycogen stores, I go for my favorite post-ride beverage—coconut juice in the tall can. Then it's on to a protein shake and finally a couple of beers to help induce some sleep to speed up recovery," said Tenorio.

Not all of Saipan's athletes share Lewie's affinity for fermented beverages, but Saipan's favorite fraternity of fearless fatigue fighters appreciate the importance of alternate forms of hydration. Consisting of athletes who've crested the 200lb. plateau, Team Manatee can be found under their team tent enjoying quality post-race hops pops following each of Saipan's major endurance events.

Self-proclaimed TRY-athlete of the year Bruce Bateman takes a page out of Team Manatee's book, as he opts to sip on Scotch whisky after an event.

"Single malt with a peaty bite works best but anything will do in a pinch. It numbs the pain and puts one in a mental reverie from which vantage point coming in last actually begins to sound palatable," said Bateman.

Bruce's son, Alexander, prefers chocolate milk as his recovery and rehydration drink of choice. The tiny tyke of the mountain bike might be ahead of his peers as a study posted in the *International Journal of Sport Nutrition and Exercise Metabolism* found that chocolate milk has an optimal ratio of carbohydrates to protein to help refuel tired muscles.

All-around athlete and fitness instructor Jackie Van Dam prefers to take young Bateman's recovery drink to a new level with the addition of nutritional supplements at Saipan's home of health: Gold's Gym.

"I love to drink a nice ice-cold chocolate soy milk protein shake after a vigorous ride or workout. It cools my body down, provides some energy and recovery for my muscles, tastes delicious," said Van Dam.

Suzy Kindel hasn't bought into the chocolate milk craze yet, as she opts for water following her runs, swims, and Pilates workouts, with the exception of her Saturday morning swim sessions.

"After about 4km of a hard Masters workout I have that great cup of coffee served at Shenanigans! Great way to make up for having to get up early," she said

Local footballer Jershwin Angeles found his fountain of youth in the form of a 12oz. bottle of POWERade. In 2009, POWERade released a new version of their sports drink, which helps replenish four electrolytes lost in sweat: sodium, calcium, potassium and magnesium, and Angeles swears by it.

"I've been drinking it for two years now. It hydrates my body well and the taste is not bad, not too sweet for me. Sometimes I still buy Vault or Coke Zero if I am still thirsty and drink it while driving home." TS

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REZNE WONG

ROSELYN B. MONROYO
TAGA Sports Staff Writer

When he was 8, Rezne Wong balked at swimming for a club. Or rather, he was frightened and intimidated at the prospect of swimming for CNMI Hall of Famer Bill Sakovich. Who wouldn't be, knowing that one of the pillars of CNMI sports would be taking your measure as a swimmer and an athlete?

"I was 8 when I was recommended to swim for Saipan Swim Club. I was terrified of having to swim for 'Mister' [Sakovich] every day of the week, so when he asked if I wanted to swim for the club, I just shook my head," the 19-year-old Wong said.

The CNMI has its lucky stars to thank that Wong was prevailed on to change his mind. Sakovich saw in the lanky boy talent and great attitude and, with the prescience of his vast experience behind him, he knew the Marianas High School graduate would be a good swimmer someday.

Eleven years after that fateful meeting,

Swimmin

Wong led the CNMI's successful campaign in the swimming competition in the 7th Micronesian Games, winning a record 13 gold medals and one silver and earning for himself the Top Male Athlete Award of the event.

Last year, it was Sakovich who helped Wong red-shirt for the University of Hawaii-Manoa swim team and the latter eventually made it to the team.

Calling

Wong had his first race when he was 8, competing against much older swimmers to finish at sixth in the 50m freestyle.

"I can still remember everyone ahead of me. After that race, I decided to train harder to get faster. I have that same dedication until today," said Wong.

Before swimming, however, Wong first showed potential in tennis and cross-country.

"I also played basketball and honestly, I sometimes thought of playing basketball or running the track instead of swimming. But every time I swim, I feel like it's what I am called to do," Wong said.

"I have never seriously considered quitting swimming. It is tough, very tiring, and time consuming. There is not much money in the sport; it does not make you very famous, unlike those in basketball or football. Look at Kobe Bryant and Eli Manning and compare them to Michael Phelps. But nevertheless, I believe if it is your calling then you have to go for it. I swim because my heart tells me to," he added.

Wong said being in the water gives him mixed feelings.

"When I hit the water I get a peace of mind and during races, I feel nervous too. It is a mixed feeling worth experiencing," he said.

Anchor

When asked to swim for the CNMI in the Micro Games, Wong knew he would be the go-to-guy in Palau.

"I also knew that I was the oldest and most experienced on the team, so I realized my responsibility and did the best I could to lead, support, encourage, discipline, and facilitate the team. I am not a perfect leader, but I loved my team and they took care of me too," Wong said.

The pressure on Wong grew as the competition neared, especially when news of the Marshall Islands becoming the CNMI's toughest rival with the absence of Guam reached him.

"When I was in Hawaii, I learned that the Marshall Islands is fielding a strong team. Since learning that news, I turned from 'cruise' to 'focus.' The Marshall Islands and Palau did very well against us and if they keep training hard and smart, they will reach a high level of competitiveness in a few years," said Wong, who almost did not make it on the team, as he was close to joining summer training in Manoa for the U.S. Nationals.

"People can win and get famous and rich. The world will glorify them for a while until the next athlete or person outclasses them. Aside from the 13 gold medals and one silver, I wanted to give pride to the CNMI, lead, and encourage my team and make friends with every athlete in the Micro Games. Medals fade away, but the difference you have made to people you meet and the love for God are always remembered," Wong said.

Resilience

Wong had only one gold medal in the 2006 Micronesia Games and could have won three more had he not been beaten by only a few hundredths of a second in several races.

However, he did not give up and he finally won the gold medal in the 200m individual medley.

"I kept being resilient no matter how disappointing it was to be beaten several times in close races. When I won the gold medal in the 200m IM, that was the sweetest moment of my life," Wong said.

The CNMI swimmer hopes young swimmers in the Commonwealth will also persevere, practice hard regardless of the lack of resources, and do their best in every race.

"Many athletes just have more talent and better resources. That's reality. Life is unfair, but we always have a choice to do something about it. If you persevere and disregard all the unfairness, you can win without even having to beat the other guy because he did not beat your heart to fight and continue improving your skills," Wong said.

A Marine Biology student, Wong also advises fellow swimmers to value school first before anything else.

"Swimming will take you to places and give you fame, but an education will give you a job, a living, and a family. Balance your lives to become successful in the pool, classroom, and in your relationships with others. If someone beats you, congratulate them. If you win, congratulate your competitors and remain humble. Swim with a purpose and heart," Wong said.

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Revival

A story of how one simple letter could have so much lasting impact for so many

BOB COLDEEN
Contributing Writer

While final preparations were being made in Cape Canaveral for the Apollo 11 moon landing and organizers were choosing bands for the upcoming Woodstock Music Festival, top male and female athletes competed on Saipan in the Micronesian Olympics, the first ever multi-sport competition held between the islands in the Western North Pacific.

Meanwhile a skinny boy in central Florida who had just graduated from high school was working in the phosphate mines to earn money for college. He had never heard of Micronesia or Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands; they had not taught him that in school.

The 1969 Micronesian Olympics were originally designed as a way of unifying islands that were not only separated by wide spans of ocean, but also separated by different languages, cultures, and political aspirations.

The sporting event was supposed to reheld in 1973 but by then the winds of change were blowing through the districts of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. Instead of coming together, the islands were pulling apart.

As in any large-scale effort, it takes a few dedicated leaders to pull something off of that magnitude. But in the early '70s, there simply was not anyone who stepped up to see that the Micronesian Olympics was organized and they were left to fade to memories.

That skinny boy was now a young man who had just graduated from college and moved to Chuuk as a Peace Corps volunteer. He was told not to take anything more than he could fit into his one suitcase. Naturally he took his baseball glove, something he considered as vital as shirts and shorts and underwear.

During his years living on Weno, he played a few pickup baseball games: Americans vs. Chuukese. It was after one of those games that the young man first heard from one of the Chuukese players all about Palau beating Chuuk 1-0 to win the baseball gold medal in the Micro Olympics. Although the game was by then already four years in the past, the man who told the story made it seem like it had just happened. Obviously, it had meant a lot to them.

By the time that skinny American moved from Rota to Saipan in 1980, he had earned a potbelly but kept his glove and desire to play. His first foray into local sports was playing softball at Mt. Carmel field. As someone who had grown up admiring sports announcers, and had had his own radio show in high school and often emceed events, he was not shy and asked if he could be the announcer at the games. That's how he became friends with Francisco M. Palacios who was always the scorekeeper and sat next to him.

During one of the games, the American asked Tan'ko if he remembered seeing that 1969 gold medal baseball game. "I was the scorekeeper," he said, adding "I still have the original scoresheets."

The Saipan Major League was formed in 1982 and soon baseball replaced fast-pitch softball as the CNMI's favorite sport.

In 1988 Pete Calvo from Guam enlisted the support of Mobil Oil to establish an interisland baseball competition called the "Mobil Games." Teams from Guam, Palau, and Saipan played a tournament that attracted thousands of fans. The no longer young American was impressed by the excitement and attention the international tournament received. A seed was planted in his head.

He thought to himself, if this baseball tournament brought this amount of excitement to the island, what if the Micronesian Olympics returned to Saipan for its 20th anniversary. He wrote a letter to Gov. Pedro P. Tenorio suggesting that the CNMI take the lead in re-organizing the event to be held in 1989.

By 1990 Larry Guerrero, who played shortstop on the first baseball team from Saipan to play on Guam in 1958, had become governor. He also endorsed the idea and supported a committee to make it happen.

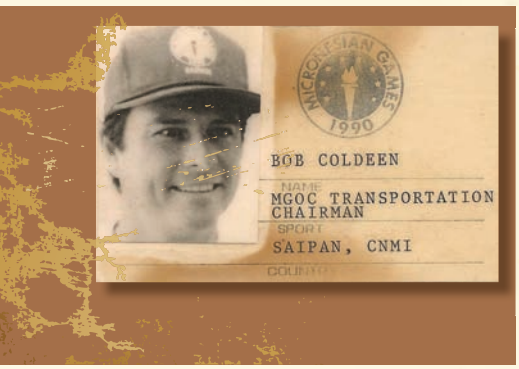
Bill Sakovich, who was director of Sports and Recreation at the time, was a logical choice. The

governor's assistant, Frank Rosario, who knew the key leaders in all the island districts and was a sports fan, became a key member. Ed Manibusan was added to lend common sense and leadership; he became chairman. Tenorio also asked the letter-writer to be part of the group.

Soon after the four met it became apparent that someone with financial acumen was needed. Sports enthusiast and financial expert Mike Grandinetti was invited and he accepted with enthusiasm.

As the event stretched into the community more people were added to the organizing committee: Rick Duenas, Bobby Winkfield, Jack Angelo, Dr. Tony Stearns, Tony Satur, Capt. Frank Camacho, Jim Feger, Dr. Jose Chong, Tom Pangelinan, and Lucy Sablan.

Corporate sponsors were added, each donating $25,000 to the Games: Duty Free, Mobil Oil, and Shimizu corporations.



Other island districts were invited, including Guam. The original Micro Olympics did not include Guam for they were not part of the Trust Territory. However the planning committee decided that since Guam was an integral part of Micronesia, they should be invited.

The organizing committee discovered the worldwide Olympics owned the rights to that name and they would not be able to use it. So the committee renamed the event to be the Micronesian Games.

Although other island districts eagerly endorsed the idea and wanted to attend, they were unable to properly prepare in such a short time and suggested holding the event in 1990.

And that is when the games were held to a resounding success. The entire island of Saipan embraced the Games, including necessary business and volunteer support. While Saipan enjoyed serving as host, it was agreed by all that the Games should be rotated among island entities so that people living there could enjoy the spectacle as well.

After seeing how wonderful the Games became, Guam successfully bid to hold the event in 1994. Palau followed as host in 1998. Pohnpei hosted the Micronesian Games in 2002.

Yap was selected as host of the 2006 Games. However, a devastating typhoon prior to that destroyed much of their infrastructure and they announced they would be unable to host. Once again the CNMI stepped up and offered to host instead, even though there was only one year left to plan.

After initially agreeing to host, Gov. Benigno R. Fitial announced in February 2006 that he was cancelling the Games due to a lack of financial capability in times of economic downturn.

However, a few weeks later he was persuaded to reverse his decision and hold the Games after receiving an adequate financial plan on how they could be accomplished without significant government spending.

One of those people involved in getting the governor to change his mind was that same guy who had written the original letter to Gov. Guerrero to resume the games. He was afraid that if the Micronesian Games was not held that year, then the momentum and enthusiasm could be lost and once again, they would fade from history. Understanding how much sports meant to so many young men and women in Micronesia, he endeavored to make sure they would happen. And they did. The 2006 Micronesian Games was a success in that the sports competition was excellent, many of them held under international regulations. The tradition continued.

The Marshall Islands wanted to host the 2010 Games. However, Palau had more capability to host the games in terms of overall sports facilities. The Micronesian Games Organizing Council approved Palau. The Palau National Olympic Committee and its chairman, Frank Kyota, who had played in the 1988 Mobil Games, labeled them the "7th Micronesian Games." For the first time, the Games had a number, meaning that tradition had been firmly established for the region's premier multi-sport event.

The 8th Micronesian Games will be held in Pohnpei in 2014. Palau did such an excellent job of hosting the 7th Games, it will be difficult for Pohnpei to equal that but of course they will try. And for the thousand-plus mostly young men and women who will participate from all the islands in Micronesia, that is all that matters. It is something to strive for, to work for.

Because the Micronesian Games has emerged as such a positive event on so many levels, it's hard to imagine them not happening. But that is almost what happened. Funny how one simple letter can have so much lasting impact for so many.

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‘When you have stress, go play football. When you kick the ball,

Falling for fo

It’s 5pm on a weekday afternoon on Saipan. The company time clock has just been punched, and women around the island are rushing out the door, grabbing their cleats and water bottles, and hitting the pitch for a rousing game of fast, furious, and—most of all— fun football.

CATHERINE ANDERSON

Contributing Writer

When women’s football season is on, it’s hard to miss. Groups of blue, green, red, and yellow jerseys gather at Oleai Sports Complex field, Francisco C. Ada Airport field, or wherever the match is set. The game day and time may vary with each season, but spirits are consistently high for what many of the players claim is the best exercise, stress-relief, and social event you can pack into 90 minutes.

On the field, the attack comes in clearly opposite directions. But before and after the whistle, the colors mingle as the ladies share the camaraderie of friendships formed and affirmed by football. Many have other sports they have played—or loved—B.F. (before football), but for others, the game has been their formal initiation into the world of sports—and they have fallen fast and hard.

“I had never played football or any other sports in my life, because reading books and playing video games were all-consuming hobbies of mine,” says Natalie Hill. “I immediately loved everything about soccer as soon as my foot touched the ball. I loved the pace of the game, the challenge of learning new skills, and the opportunity to meet some extraordinary women. Football has allowed me to meet a number of people from diverse backgrounds, some who have become great friends of mine.”

Hill was drafted into the women’s recreation league four years ago by her friend Patty. Since then, there’s been no looking back for this 27-year-old, who has been named to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Women’s National Team for the last two years.

“I remember being nervous at first to step out on the field and not have a single clue as to how to play the game. Now, though, I can’t imagine my life without football,” Hill said. “In fact I found it so addictive that at one point I was training for or playing soccer six days a week!”

Accountant Deng Angeles started her football ventures even more recently in an even more challenging setting, playing

your stress goes with the ball—far away.'—Mei Rengiil

otball

against men in the island's co-ed league. Angeles has only one word to describe her first impression of the game.

"Hard!"

The 48-year-old Angeles says playing co-ed football for Team Purple has kept her exercising and focused, while also allowing her to mingle with players from the five other teams in the league. As for lessons learned on the pitch, she is again—in classic accountant style— concise and precise.

"Keep moving!"

Despite the challenges, Angeles says the sport is fun.

Full-time mom and part-time accountant Lydia Maniacop caught football fever shortly after her two children started playing for Tan Holdings Football Club. After attending a number of her children's games and practices, she gained the courage to also join the co-ed league.

"At first, I thought this game was dangerous due to the many accidents I saw watching it on the television," said Maniacop. "But if you learn the techniques on how to play, you will find out that this sport is good for exercise."

Sounding like a seasoned pro, Maniacop extols the benefits of the game.

"Instead of enrolling in a gym and paying a fee, I recommend people join this game," said Maniacop. "You will feel physically and mentally fit."

Mei Rengiil also began playing within the last year when friends recommended she become involved.

"My first impression about football was that it's a tiring sport," said Rengiil. "You always have to run after the ball."

Playing once a week after work in the co-ed league, she says one of the biggest lessons she has learned is about supporting each other on the field.

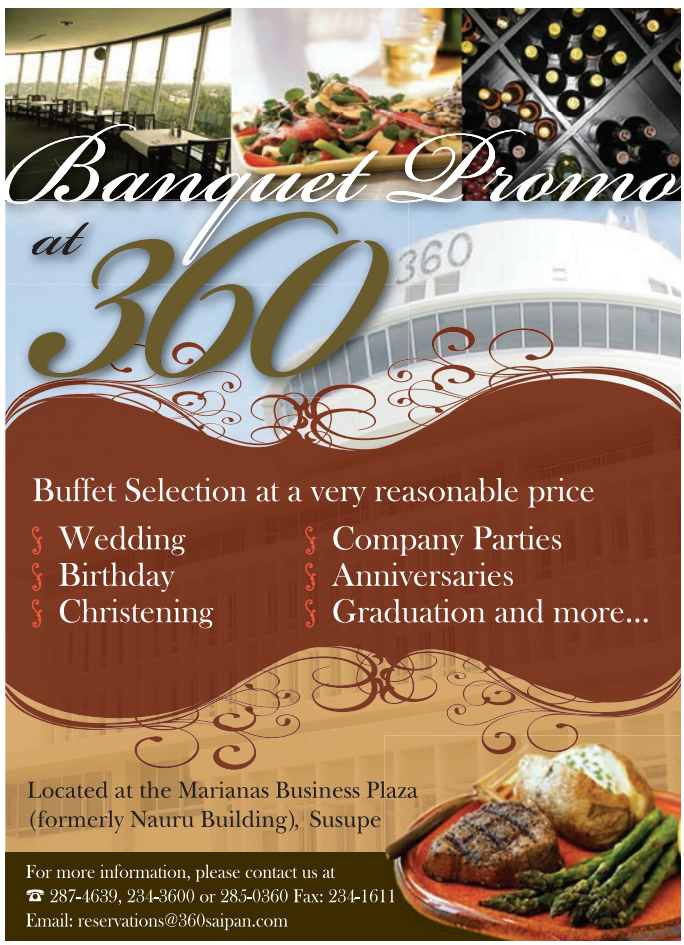
"I've learned football is a team sport. If you miss the ball, there is always someone backing you up," she said.

Hill echoed that sentiment of support, noting that although the CNMI National Team has suffered some crushing defeats against other Asian national teams, they have not let that undermine their determination and their heart.

"Through football, I've learned cooperation, teamwork, and decision making. The dynamics of the game challenges you to work with your teammates, listen to them carefully, and trust their decisions," she said. "Playing on the national team these past two years has always been rewarding, but never easy. We've always played with passion and to the best of our ability."

Whether national team member or first-timer, the ladies who have found and fallen for football all seem to echo that sentiment. The spirit of the game makes it a physical, mental, and emotional encounter where—no matter the score—every woman comes out a winner.

Whether national team member or first-timer, the ladies who have found and fallen for football all seem to echo that sentiment. The spirit of the game makes it a physical, mental, and emotional encounter where—no matter the score—every woman comes out a winner.



Yvonne, left, and Yvette Bennett are all smiles at a Northern Marianas Athletics-organized sendoff party for them in August, a couple of days before the twins left for Boise, Idaho.

MARK RABAGO

MARK RABAGO
Associate Editor

Sibling revelry

You'd think that after 20 years of sharing a room, borrowing each other's clothes, attending the same class from preschool to high school, and constantly being together, twins and accomplished track athletes Yvonne and Yvette Bennett would relish the chance to finally be on their own.

But the daughters of former Board of Education teachers' representative Ambrose Bennett and wife Lilian haven't had enough of their sister act yet; in fact, they have decided to enroll at Boise State University and major in the same degree, business.

"We did plan to go to the same college, but didn't plan on pursing the same major. Who knows one of us might even change our major, you never know. But we both love it out here and we think this was the best place for us to go," the Bennett twins said in an email to TAGA *Sports*.

Yvonne and Yvette, who left Saipan in mid-August, said they are lucky to have each other to lean on as they explore a new chapter in their lives in Idaho.

"The transition is easier now that we both are in college and are attending the same university. You'll always know that no matter what happens you have someone to turn to, to help you out, and of course to be a friend and a sister. So we are taking full advantage of [our] being twins," the 20-year-olds said.

More than twins

Although they have lived on Saipan practically their entire lives, Yvonne and Yvette were actually born at the Guam Memorial Hospital on July 29, 1990. Yvonne is a couple of minutes older than Yvette.

They may be identical twins but their parents say Yvonne and Yvette might as well be conjoined twins as the *dingas*—twins in Chamorro—have been inseparable since birth.

"They are truly twins in many ways, especially in their thinking, moral fiber, and character. They have always done many things together and they like many of the same things like food, entertainment, and the normal teenage stuff. Most of the time they have both participated in the same activities in school, as altar servers, in Teen Talk, and other activities," said Ambrose.

"The twins had always had a mind of their own, but would always stick together as if they were the only ones left on earth…one would start something—anything—and the other would follow," added Lilian.

Even the Bennett twins admit that they are like two peas in a pod as they are both caring, friendly, and are people persons.

"We also have a lot of the same interests in music and in our daily routines. But most importantly, we always talk to each other before we make decisions," the two said.

So alike but still different

While friends and classmates always had trouble telling them apart, leave it to their mother to identify Yvonne and Yvette's subtle nuances.

"Each twin actually has a different facial shape, oval (Yvette) and round (Yvonne)…their hair are short (Yvette) and long (Yvonne), their

> The twins had always had a mind of their own, but would always stick together as if they were the only ones left on earth…one would start something—anything—and the other would follow.

height is 1/2 inch apart, and the other sucks her thumb (Yvonne) and the other doesn't. Yvette was always the aggressor while Yvonne usually stands on the sidelines. …She would also tell on her sister," joked Lilian.

Ambrose takes it a step further, saying they often call Yvonne the "athlete" of the two because she has a punk-rock style and Yvette is the "beauty queen" because she is a budding fashionista.

"Yvette is more on the girly side while Yvonne has some masculine attitude in her, as she never cared to dress up, put on makeup, or even to polish her nails. …Character-wise, Yvette is feminine and self-conscious as well as into fashion. Yvonne is laidback, happy- go-lucky but straightforward and has a good sense of humor," Lilian said.

Like typical siblings, the twins admit to arguing at times for the most trivial of issues.

"We do get into arguments, we try not to but it does happen, and sometimes it's for the silliest things too. It never lasts long, it ends fairly quickly, I guess we are both just softhearted people, which we get from our parents," both said.

"Yvette is more on the girly side while Yvonne has some masculine attitude in her."

Athletic prowess

Not many know this, but the more feminine Yvette got into track before Yvonne, Micronesia's fastest woman who reset the 100m, 200m, and 400m records in the recently concluded 7th Micronesians Games in Palau.

"Me and my sister both started track in our freshmen year of high school. It was Yvette's idea to try out the sport so she signed both of us up," said Yvonne.

You can also say that the twins' prowess in track is due to their genes, as their father, Ambrose, was once ranked No. 3 among U.S. junior college athletes in the 400m.

He was also considered for the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, Germany. The elder Bennett matriculated at LeMoyne-Owen College in Memphis, Tennessee under a four-year track scholarship.

"They got started in track because Yvette knew that I was very good in track," said Ambrose.

Carpe diem

Yvonne and Yvette have already promised to represent the CNMI in future regional events and to this end will try out for Boise State's track and field team.

However, athletics and pursuing their business degree in Idaho are not the only things they want to get into.

"We both plan on continuing track in college, it's something we've been looking forward to. And aside from sports we do have other interest like I always have been interested in culinary arts, so I plan to get into that while in college and/or after. Yvette has always had an eye for interior design and modeling, so she plans to get more into that as well," said Yvonne.

With each other by their side, who can say where the Bennett twins will end up next?

MMA

is here to stay

MARK RABAGO
Associate Editor

On an island where watching baseball, softball, basketball, and volleyball is always free, fans of mixed martial arts—from the most rabid to the casual follower—have no qualms paying top dollar to see their favorite fighters beat each other out.

Whether it be inside the cool confines of a cavernous hotel or sweltering hot industrial warehouses, MMA events are always jampacked, lending credence to the emerging belief that it is arguably the most popular and fastest growing sport on the island.

At last count, more than a dozen MMA clubs have sprouted on Saipan since the sport's introduction some six years ago in Fury Fighting Islands.

Zalaka, Zogai, TK9, OutReyes, Haga T, ZengZung, South Side Syndicates, Team Chaos, Team Pwang, and XXTREME have joined more established clubs like Team Predator Combat, Marianas Elite, Gracie Barra, and of course Trench Tech in the island's roster of MMA clubs.

Its fan base is also a veritable cross-section of the islands' melting pot society, with locals rubbing elbows with transplanted statesiders and Asians in cheering on and jeering at fighters.

It's also not unusual to see high-heeled debutantes and their equally opulent escorts seated side by side with common folk in zoris and cutoff shirts during MMA events.

"MMA appeals to the primal and emotional psyche of fans. Paying to see their favorite fighter go toe-to-toe is both electric and exciting. Our fans are deeply loyal to our fighters and this is manifested in the loud cheering and jumping during the events. Of course the fighters themselves feed off the crowd and this makes for a very unique experience...not at all passive like a concert or movie. Fans have a big part in the action and this is one reason why they keep coming back," said Jeff Boyer of Gorilla Warfare Mixed Martial Arts.

Cuki Alvarez, president and promoter of Trench Tech Purebred Gym, said familial ties and affinity could be the culprit behind MMA's tremendous success the past few years.

"What makes MMA so appealing on Saipan to this day is that it's still a new, up-and-coming sport. Fight fans have seen the evolution of the sport from the early days and humble beginnings to the show that it is now. They have also seen their sons, uncles, cousins, fathers, and brothers grow and evolve in the sport. And are always excited and eager to see who will fight next," he said.

And in the age of reality TV, Alvarez said MMA takes the cake with its exciting and unpredictable matchups.

"The adrenaline rushes through all in attendance because of the

many different matchups, the anticipation of what can happen in those matchups and just the sheer talk of the matchups, fans are just drawn to this type of suspense and action and it gives them an amazing rush!

"The thing that is also exciting is that you never know what will happen. Fighters train hard and are steadfast in bringing their opponents down in the name of team honor and bragging rights. This in itself is very intriguing. Many teams have spawned since the start and this [MMA] allows us to compete in the only sporting arena that truly tests fighting skills," he said.

It also doesn't hurt that local MMA fighters like Charles "The Predator" Aiken, Frank "The Crank" Camacho, and Keli "Rukiz" Manglona have become household names because of their prowess inside the ring or octagon.

For Tan Siu Lin Foundation manager and longtime fight fan Ed Arriola, his love affair with MMA stretched back to 1997 when he caught a glimpse of Superbrawl V in Guam.

He said MMA answered so many questions he and his friends had about different fighting styles.

"What if a boxer fought a wrestler? What if karate went against judo? Who would win? But today it's either how good are you in boxing versus how good are you in wrestling (jiu-jitsu). More power to the competitor that is skilled in both," he said.

> "In the beginning I liked watching because it was raw excitement to see the fights. Today, the fights are still exciting but I enjoy the crowds around me more so. When everyone is yelling and screaming around you, you become part of the show…part of the entertainment."

For Ivan Quichocho, NMC Foundation board member and avowed MMA fanatic, the sport's appeal is that fans are always on the edge of their seats for the unexpected.

"There is no set skill set, strategy, or martial arts discipline that determines any clear winner or who will rise to the top. In MMA anything can happen. Everybody has a puncher's chance and anybody can get caught in a submission in a split second," he said. "[It] can be highly technical and drawn-out or can be brutally quick. This sport is extremely dynamic in that you just never know."

Quichocho said fighters themselves are so colorful and can range from street brawlers to full on college-degree holding/MBA graduates.

"Combinations of disciplines make the sport very interesting and how each fighter puts forward a strategy in training camp, which may differ greatly only three months later for a different match. It's a young sport that brings combat sports closer to real life confrontations in the street and is viewed as more practical when studying self-defense," he added.

Even the current economic downturn has not dampened MMA's appeal to its fan base nor its future prospects.

"Trench Tech is not worried about the effect [of the economic downturn] for future fights. As with any business, in order to keep the doors open and survive, you need to evolve and cater your business concepts according to the economy and times (cost of living). We have been in a slump for the past 10 years, therefore, it really isn't something new and unexpected," said Alvarez.

Boyer, meanwhile, admits that Gorilla Warfare has begun to feel the economic pinch, but vowed that the MMA promotions company will be resilient and will weather the financial storm.

"I can't think of any business that hasn't been affected by the downturn so yes, it has affected our operation as well. While we strive to offer a quality event, the loss of disposable income means that consumers are looking for any savings, which basically entail a reduction in ticket prices. Our group will have to consider and possibly implement that option," he said.

Alvarez said Trench Tech has always been cognizant of the tough economic times and that was why it has scrapped VIP seating in its MMA events. From $45 for VIP guests and $25 for general admission a couple of years ago, tickets for Trench Tech events are now sold from $20 to $25 for all seating.

"We at Trench Tech know this [economic slump] and have based our events and prices accordingly. Simply stated, in order to sale a product the customer must be able to afford that product but more importantly, he must be interested in buying that product. So it all comes down to marketing and advertising," he said.

Last year, the local MMA community faced its toughest challenge to date when Rep. Stanley Torres introduced a bill that sought to regulate the sport.

Although it died a natural death at the Legislature, Alvarez and Boyer at that time criticized the bill as "too regulating" and scored the legislation's exorbitant fees that could ultimately lead to the sport's and industry's demise.

Since then Boyer has somewhat softened his stand and said that MMA may have to accept being under the purview of a regulating body in the future.

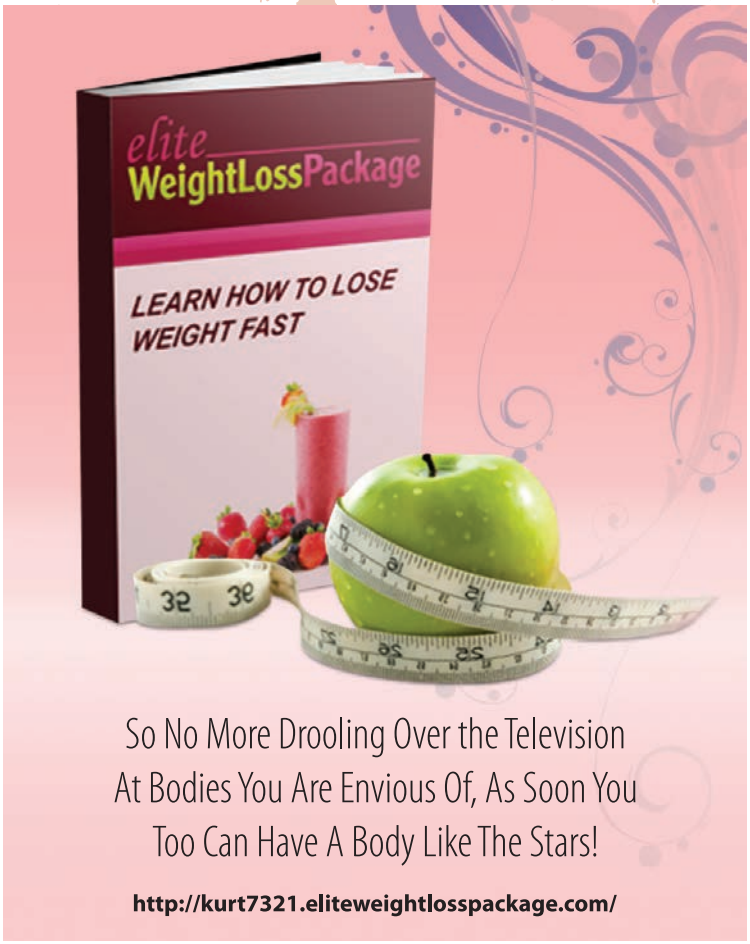
"Whether we agree with it or not the process of sanctioning our sport is inevitable. We've expressed our views and stated the inconsistencies in the proposed bill and hopefully our lawmakers consider this because the sport is clearly popular, but it could also end in the blink of an eye if not implemented carefully. We'll always remain open to dialogue if they would like to talk with us," he said.

For his part, Alvarez said in an almost tongue-and-cheek way that he's not totally opposed to Rep. Torres' bill, "He just needs to amend about 75 percent of the regulation he's proposing to cater to our poor island…"

Torres, whose son Anthony ironically is the first Chamorro to fight in the Ultimate Fighting Championship in the mainland, said recently that he is already planning to re-introduce his bill to regulate MMA.

Regulated or not, one thing has become abundantly clear and that is MMA is alive and well in the CNMI. It can be best summed up by Alvarez's contention that it has evolved from being merely a sport into an all-out spectacle.

"Fight fans are treated to not just exciting fights but an 'extravaganza' so to speak. From the video production of highlight fights of knockouts and blood, to beautiful women rousing the crowd as ring girls. MMA is not just an event, but a spectacle for all fans in attendance."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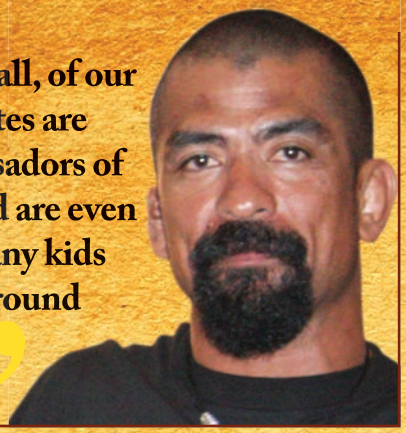

> Most, if not all, of our MMA athletes are great ambassadors of the sport and are even heroes to many kids and adults around the islands.

BOON OR

WALTER SUTHERLAND

TAGA Sporst Staff Writer

Is mixed martial arts good or bad for the CNMI? I recently sat down with Trench Tech Promotions owner Cuki Alvarez to discuss perhaps the fastest growing and one of the most controversial sports in the world.

Question: How do you respond to the naysayers of your sport?

Answer: Well, first and foremost, everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion. Granted MMA isn't for everyone, but I truly believe that the pros outweigh the cons and that there are *way* more supporters than non-supporters.

The only thing that I can do is to continue to focus on the positive vibes that the sport of MMA has brought to us as a competitive community throughout the years. I will continue bringing top caliber MMA events for many years to come.

Something to be enlightened by: Since 2005, Trench Tech has held 25 unarmed combative events (over 300 bouts) in the CNMI resulting in absolutely zero serious injuries.

Many of the "naysayers" are simply uneducated in the sport and are set in their beliefs that it is "human cock fighting" and grossly barbaric. This can't be any further from the truth.

Most, if not all of the naysayers have never been to an MMA event and are judging our sport based on sheer opinion. Simply put, MMA is statistically much more safe than any other contact sport, including boxing. If you want proof, just Google it. As with any sport, especially contact sports, there will *always* be risks involved and MMA is no different; however our rules and regulations keep our sport *very* safe.

Q: In what ways has MMA benefited the CNMI community?

A: Since MMA was first introduced to the CNMI in May of 2004 at Fury Fighting Islands - Tinian, the sport has grown tremendously and its popularity has spawned a huge following.

It has benefited our island community in many ways by creating local talent throughout the years. Local heroes and ambassadors who, through competitive fighting, have represented our island nation in such countries such as the Philippines, Japan, Korea, China, Hong Kong, Guam, and the United States. Some have even become world champions like Frank "The Crank" Camacho and local champions like Keli "The Rukiz" Manglona.

The sport of MMA has brought [to the CNMI] international competitors from all over the world such as Japan, the Philippines, Russia, Korea, U.S., Guam and Abu Dhabi, to name a few, to compete in goodwill tournaments and has entertained a great many fans over the years.

It has always been our advantage that we "Create Friendships Through Fighting!"

I have always believed that through this type of sporting event, we create healthy competition, but more importantly we create friendships and MMA is the outlet for that opportunity.

Q: How can the MMA organizers improve the reputation of the sport?

A: By listening and taking constructive criticism whenever it's necessary and by working together toward a common goal that benefits the sport of MMA positively as a whole.

Q: How can MMA organizers better inform the public and assure them that MMA is a good thing?

A: We can do this by continuing to evolve and better ourselves as promoters and as athletes. I think that as a promoter, it is my responsibility to always ensure the safety of the fighters as the No. 1 priority. I think that as fighters, we should also continue to carry ourselves with respect, dignity and honor.

I would encourage everyone to come to one of our events and judge it for him or herself. Come and see just how organized and professional we hold our events and witness the awesome MMA spectacle first hand!

Q: How about the notion that some athletes turn into "bad seeds?"

A: Most, if not all, of our MMA athletes are great ambassadors of the sport and are even heroes to many kids and adults around the islands.

We have been doing this sport long enough and all fighters and competitors who have competed or entered in Trench Tech events such as Trench Warz, Rites Of Passage and/or The Art of War know that there are rules and regulations they *must* follow on and off the court, or in our case, "in and out of the Octagon."

However, it is unfortunate that some of the athletes who have competed in MMA have also had some run-ins with the law. I have always believed that if you break the law, you should pay the price. We at Trench Tech are steadfast in our mission and goal to keep the integrity of the sport in check at all times. When a fighter or MMA athlete commits a crime, then depending on the severity of that crime, we ban them indefinitely—even taking into consideration that you are innocent until proven guilty and that we are human and we all make mistakes in the game of life.

One thing we should make clear, however, is that the sport of MMA shouldn't be to blame for a bad decision made by a certain individual who practices MMA. Bad decision-making and poor judgment should be to blame.

Remember, there is really no such thing as a "bad student," but possibly a bad teacher. Still, I think it all comes down to proper teaching, guidance and discipline and most of all, *responsibility.*

Q: Have you ever had any problems with some athletes that you have trained?

A: As with any sporting body, if you have problems with a team member or student, you should enforce disciplinary action. At Trench Tech, we always enforce and teach our students to *never* use what they have learned in the gym outside unless it is for protecting your life. I also run my program on a "zero tolerance" effort, meaning, before a member signs up to train at the gym, we explain to them what we expect from them and to abide by our rules accordingly. And since nobody is perfect, when we do have a problem with a certain member, we have a pep talk with them and encourage them to learn from their mistakes and try to grow and become a better person from it.

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MARK RABAGO
Associate Editor

NMASA

The engine that keeps CNMI sports going

If the U.S. has the U.S. Olympic Committee and Guam has the Guam National Olympic Committee, the CNMI has the Northern Marianas Amateur Sports Association.

You may ask: Why is it that the umbrella sports organization of the Commonwealth doesn't have the word "Olympic" in its name?

That's because the CNMI is not part of the Olympics and, according to current NMASA president Michael White, it will not be part of the Olympic family in the foreseeable future.

Its failure to be admitted by the International Olympic Committee notwithstanding, NMASA has carved out quite an impressive resume for itself in its more than 35 years of existence.

In the recent 7th Micronesian Games in Palau, the NMASA-organized CNMI delegation finished second to the host island nation with a 92-medal haul: 44 gold, 23 silver, and 25 bronze.

Four years ago, NMASA agreed to host the 6th Micronesian Games on home turf less than six months after Yap pulled out from hosting the quadrennial event.

NMASA genesis

According to CNMI Sports Hall of Fame inductee and former NMASA president Bill Sakovich, the organization had its genesis in 1975 when the Saipan Amateur Sports Association was created.

"We formed the Saipan Amateur Sports Association initially to organize for the 1975 South Pacific Games and found it best to encompass the entire Northern Marianas, and so Rick Duenas, myself, Frank Diaz, and a few others got it going. Initially I was on a committee for the South Pacific Games and Micro Olympics with Mario Taitano, Dr. Manny Sablan, to name a few and this was in mid '70s," said Sakovich.

He said NMASA was created with the goal of preparing athletes and improving sports in the Commonwealth for international competition.

"NMASA has been the guide for sports in the CNMI, especially for international competition like the World Championships, South Pacific Games (later renamed Pacific Games), Micronesian Games, and other regional tournaments. All multi-sports events require a sanctioning body, and NMASA is it," said Sakovich.

The first sports organizations to join the then fledgling group were motor sports, basketball, baseball, softball, swimming, and tennis.

NMASA today

Current NMASA president Michael White, a lawyer by profession, lists 16 sports organizations under its umbrella: athletics, badminton, baseball, basketball, bowling, canoeing, golf, lawn tennis, sailing, spearfishing, soccer, swimming, table tennis, triathlon, volleyball, and windsurfing.

Besides White, other association officials include vice president Jeff Race of the Northern Mariana Islands Tennis Association, secretary general Rose Igitol of the Saipan Major League, and treasurer Ed Salas of the Northern Mariana Islands Football Association.

NMASA's board of directors includes Jess Wabol and Jordon Kosam of Refaluwasch Golf Association, Gil Birnbrich of outrigger canoe, Tony Rogolifoi of SML, and Elias Rangamar of Northern Marianas Athletics and Basketball Association of the Northern Mariana Islands.

As always, White said, funding remains a considerable problem for the organization, which is run by volunteers like him.

Since the CNMI is not recognized by the IOC, it's precluded from getting Olympic funding, he said. White also laments not receiving an annual budget from the CNMI government.

This lack of support, he says, is starting to show in the performance Commonwealth athletes in regional competitions.

"Getting funding is far and away our No. 1 challenge. We do appreciate what the government gives us when we go up there and beg. But it's not the way to run an organization like ours," White said.

He said he understands the CNMI government's fiscal dilemma but at the same time reiterated that the islands' sports programs get "a lot less assistance" compared to others in the region.

Looking ahead

With the 2010 Palau Micronesian Games just concluded, White said NMASA is now gearing up for the 2011 Pacific Games in Noumea and the 2011 World University Games in Shenzhen, China.

He is looking at sending a 180-strong delegation to New Caledonia next year and, if his studies don't get in the way, Palau Games Male Top Athlete Rezne Wong of swimming will be one of the CNMI's representatives to the University Games.

White said he also wants NMASA to ultimately take over the functions and responsibilities of the Division of Sports and Recreation with an annual budget commensurate to what the government currently gives the agency. TS

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

MARK RABAGO
Associate Editor

Michael Villagomez

Even before Rezne Wong and Xenavee Pangelinan made waves in the pool, Michael Villagomez was already a household name in the CNMI, the islands' golden boy of swimming.

The Mt. Carmel School alumnus represented the CNMI in many off-island competitions, was the Northern Marianas Amateur Sports Association's Athlete of the Year in 1984, and went to college at Vincennes University in Indiana on a swimming scholarship.

Michael Villagomez with his family. From left, his wife Erlinda, Mikey, Kail, and Keanna.

“I would really love to see some of my swimmers make it to the Olympics.”

Michael Villagomez, third from left, and his twin brother Matt, right, with three other pioneering swimmers of the Saipan Swim Club in the late 1970s.

Today, the now 41-year-old Villagomez is a physical education teacher at Chacha Oceanview Junior High School. He is married to the former Erlinda Ada and, along with daughter Keanna, 17, and sons Mikey, 8, and Kail, live in the family farm in I-Denni.

Curiosity leads to success

Villagomez got his start in swimming out of curiosity after seeing a bunch of his schoolmates from Mt. Carmel School walking to what is now the Fiesta Resort and Spa where there was a small kidney-shaped pool.

“I went over there, just out of curiosity, because I was friends with some of them and they were walking in… and for me swimming was like just splashing in the water…but I went in there and I said ‘wow, this was interesting.’ I went home and asked my parents to join,” he said.

The year was 1977 and the Saipan Swim Club was just a couple of years old. Along with twin brother Matt, Villagomez would train with future CNMI national swimmers Alex Screen and Jonathan Sakovich under the guidance of the latter’s parents, Bill and Jean Sakovich.

The rest of the 1970s and the early part of the 1980s saw Villagomez and the rest of the Saipan Swim Club swimmers taking part in regional competitions in Guam, Hawaii, and Japan. During this period Villagomez consistently lowered the CNMI’s backstroke and butterfly records.

Athlete of the Year

In 1984, Villagomez made his first Cocos Island Crossing, a 2.5-mile swim from Cocos Island to Merizo, Guam. He went on to win the event in a record time of 40 minutes and 28 seconds. That year also saw Villagomez break 16 CNMI records that catapulted him to the 1984 Athlete of the Year award.

In 1987, he competed in the Pan Pacific Swimming Championships in Brisbane, Australia, with Screen and Jon Sakovich. It marked the CNMI’s debut in a major international competition.

Later that year, Villagomez suited up for the CNMI at the South Pacific Games in Noumea, New Caledonia, becoming a finalist in one individual (100m backstroke) and three relay events.

College boy

In the fall of 1988, Villagomez enrolled at Vincennes University and immediately made an impact on the team. According to his coach, Harry Wickens, the 1986 Mt. Carmel graduate had a good chance to qualify the finals of the butterfly events at the NJCAA Championships.

He went on to qualify in both the 100m butterfly and 200m individual medley events and helped his team to a bronze medal in the 4x50 freestyle relay.

After his stint at the two-year junior college, Villagomez continued his studies at the University of Indianapolis where he graduated with a major in physical education.

Back on Saipan

Villagomez returned to Saipan for good in 1994 and got a job teaching P.E. at William S. Reyes Elementary School.

When the Public School System opened Kagman High School in 2000, he asked to be transferred there but was assigned in the classroom to teach fourth and fifth grade.

He moved to Chacha Oceanview in 2004 and has been teaching P.E. at the junior high school ever since.

In 2008, he and Michael Blasberg were handed the reins of the Saipan Swim Club, taking over from Michael Stewart. A year later, he assumed the club’s solo head coaching gig.

Being head coach of the club he used to swim for is a dream come true and Villagomez said he couldn’t be happier.

“Seeing the kids enjoy and at the same time improve… seeing them growing up and becoming accomplished swimmers is just a joy…we just came from the Micro Games [in Palau] and we had swimmers do very well. It’s all I could ask for,” said Villagomez.

Hall of Fame

Exactly 20 years after winning the NMASA Athlete of the Year award, the CNMI’s umbrella sports organization in 2004 enshrined Villagomez in the NMASA Hall of Fame.

What made the honor more special for Villagomez was him accepting the award alongside his mentors, Bill and Jean Sakovich.

“It was quite an honor. I was surprise as I thought there were other athletes. It was a real honor especially because I was enshrined alongside my two mentors, Bill and Jean,” he said.

The Sakoviches, Villagomez, and basketball great Tony Rogolifoi were the first-ever inductees to the Hall of Fame.

When asked what else he wants to accomplish for CNMI swimming, Villagomez said he would like to one day see one of his wards make it to the Olympics.

“I would really love to see some of my swimmers make it to the Olympics. I would also like some of them to go to college on a swimming scholarship and eventually come back and help with swimming here,” he said.

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